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UNCLAS PRETORIA 003391

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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA INAUGURATES RECEIVING STATION FOR
EARTH OBSERVING SATELLITES

1. Summary. The recent launch of earth observing satellite reception capability at South Africa's Satellite Applications Center (SAC) extends and enhances ongoing efforts to apply satellite-based information to support agriculture, food security, and disaster management and mitigation efforts. The SAC has, and continues to expand good working relationships with USG agencies and academic institutions. End summary.

2. On Tuesday, July 20, Deputy Minister for Agriculture and Land Affairs Dirk du Toit presided over the launch of reception capability of two earth observing satellite systems, the Moderate-resolution Imaging Spectro radiometer (MODIS) and Landsat imagery, at South Africa's Satellite Application Center (SAC) in Hartebeeshoek, outside Pretoria. The MODIS system is a new generation of satellite sensors developed by NASA to monitor land, ocean and atmospheric processes. According to the Council on Scientific and Industrial Research, this is the first MODIS direct broadcast receiving station in Africa.

3. Since 2000, the National Department of Agriculture (NDA) has underwritten the R 12 million (currently USD 2 million) procurement of a MODIS receiving and processing system, based on useful MODIS applications for the agricultural sector, namely information on food security, crop yield monitoring, grazing capacity, and land degradation. MODIS also provides information on global change, disaster management and disaster mitigation. The South African government plans to make satellite imagery data freely available to SADC governments, research organizations and non-governmental organizations.

4. The SAC has developed specialized applications based on MODIS images, in particular, a fire warning service that is expected to benefit the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Phillip Frost, the SAC remote sensing specialist most involved in MODIS and related applications and activities, told EST Officer that the SAC has worked with the U.S. Geological Survey and NASA to install required software for a rapid response system for "near real-time" fire detection in SADC. SAC then developed a system of real-time alerts through e-mail and cellular phone text messages when fires break out near any installation of Eskom, the national electricity supplier. SAC hopes to market this innovative system at an upcoming international conference of electric power companies.

5. According to Frost, SAC also has an excellent working relationship with the University of Maryland and NASA on the Southern African Fire Network (SAFNET) and Global Observation of Forest Cover Fire. SAC was recently chosen as a fourth partner for algorithm development for NASA's Direct Broadcast Bidirectional Reflection Distribution Function (BRDF) Proposal, joining Australia, China and Utah Forestry Services. SAC will work closely with Boston University's Dr. Crystal Schaaf on this project.

HUME